

EXTENSION SNAPSHOT

Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit

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Extension Master Naturalists explore Prairie Hills Wetland Reserve and build new partnership with Prairie Land Conservancy

What began as an opportunity to explore a “new-to-them” hiking site turned into a new partnership for [University of Illinois Extension Master Naturalists](#) (EMN).

“In July we hosted a regional hike for all of the Master Naturalists in West Central Illinois,” explained Christine Belless, ag and natural resources coordinator. “We selected a site that was new for our Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell EMNs but is located right in the middle of our unit, [Prairie Hills Wetland Reserve](#).”

Prairie Hills Wetland Reserve is located near Banner, IL and is one of two public sites owned by [Prairie Land Conservancy](#). Prairie Hills is 600 acres of habitats ranging from wetlands to upland prairies just off of the Illinois River Scenic Byway. This special piece of property is the keystone to connecting [Rice Lake](#) and [Banner Marsh](#). The PLC works to protect, restore, and enhance woodlands, prairies, and wetlands to ensure wildlife have a safe place to call home and everyone has wild spaces to enjoy.

“Learning more about Prairie Land Conservancy and their work seemed like a perfect fit for us,” explained Belless. “Since they work in 11 counties in West Central Illinois, even EMNs from outside our unit could get involved.” PLC is an accredited conservation land trust and a division of Prairie Hills Resource Conservation and Development, with over 2,000 acres of land in their care, located between the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers.

Kirsten Boesen, Prairie Land Conservancy stewardship coordinator, and PLC board members Greg Arnett and Chris Enroth shared the rich history of Prairie Hills Wetland Reserve along with their ongoing conservation efforts. The event included a hands-on demonstration of how EMNs can teach youth how to mix native prairie seeds and broadcast them on a hike through the prairie. New EMN volunteer Ed Coleman stated, “I live only a few miles away and never knew this place existed. I would like to volunteer here!”

Boesen shared volunteer and continuing education opportunities with PLC and was excited about the response. “I received several requests from Master Naturalists expressing interest to join the call list for prescribed burning,” Boesen shared. “Since then, PLC has had two successful burns. Both burns included new EMNs. Another EMN took the initiative to reach out to perform flora-fauna surveys at PHWR and has done three field days there concentrating on this.”

Belless and Boesen agree the partnership between EMN and PLC will continue to be beneficial to both organizations. To learn more about the Prairie Land Conservancy, visit www.prairielandconservancy.org



Thomas Menger, Extension Master Naturalist from Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit, participated in a hike and native prairie seed sowing lesson at Prairie Land Conservancy's Prairie Hills Wetland Reserve near Banner, IL. The Conservancy operates in 11 counties in West Central Illinois. Local EMNs have since gotten involved in various volunteer projects at Prairie Hills.

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